

What is Emotional Intelligence, Really?

Written by: Dr. Nanette Miner, Leadership Development and Workplace-Learning Strategy Consultant, The Training Doctor

We've been hearing the phrase "emotional intelligence" a lot in relation to the workplace, haven't we?

Companies tout the fact that their managers possess empathy and emotional intelligence – and that makes the company a desirable place to work. Managers are cautioned, "If you don't demonstrate emotional intelligence, you won't have the buy-in or cooperation of your workers."

It's interesting that we've been hearing the term so much in recent years when it has been in our lexicon for over *three decades*.

Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer coined the term "Emotional Intelligence" in 1990 and a few years later Harvard professor Daniel Golman made it popular in educational circles (both schools and training departments) with his book titled, *Emotional Intelligence*.

If you were to Google how many times Harvard Business Review (HBR) published an article with the words "emotional intelligence" in the title – 14 articles would appear on just the first page of results. HBR has covered the topic from all sorts of angles:

- » Emotional Intelligence and Leadership: Why it's Important
- » How to Hire for Emotional Intelligence
- » The EI Advantage: Driving Innovation
- » Quiz yourself: Do you Lead with Emotional Intelligence?
- » and of course, the compilation: HBR's Must Reads on Emotional Intelligence



So Emotional Intelligence (EI) is all around us and yet most of us don't really know how that translates to performance on the job.

The two researchers, Mayer and Salovey, defined EI as "a form of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's thinking and action."

Here is an example of EI in action:

When someone drives aggressively or flips off other drivers or lays on their horn, I choose to think, "they must be having a bad day," or "maybe they are having an emergency and have to get somewhere quickly." But many other drivers would respond with the same type of aggressive behavior.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to choose your actions based on your own emotions or your observation of the emotions or motivations of others.

My observation is: if someone is behaving aggressively while driving, they certainly aren't aiming their aggression at me, I don't even know them. They are under emotional duress for some reason at that moment, and they are expressing it through their words or actions. I can understand that. I can empathize (an expression of EI) with that. I can let it slide.

So how does this recognition and control of emotion translate to the workplace?


It begins with *self-awareness* and purposefully changing your “default” reaction.

- » Recognize your own emotions and why you might be feeling them (did you have a frustrating commute to work, so you are beginning your day in a bad mood?).
- » Acknowledge personal biases or prejudices you might hold (young people don't want to work, building inspectors are obstacles).
- » Avoid impulsive responses. Two of my favorite phrases when I want to snap at someone are to say, “tell me more” (maybe I just misunderstood them) or ask, “how did you come to that conclusion?” Asking a question buys me time to control my emotions and also helps them to appreciate that I want to listen and learn more, which builds respect and trust. Another option, if you feel you might say something that you'll regret later, is to say, “Let me get

back to you on that,” which puts some distance between your current feelings and your response.

Next is *social-awareness* and relationship management.

- » Recognize that other people have emotions - and teams have multiples of emotions!
- » If a co-worker is responding to you in a way that seems inappropriate, ask them to share what they are feeling. For example, “I sense you're not in agreement, would you tell me why?” Or, “Do you have questions for me?” These questions also demonstrate that you are concerned about their well-being.
- » Manage relationships by proactively addressing conflict, being honest and open about how you are feeling, and ensuring your team communicates opening and tactfully.

As a leader, demonstrating emotional intelligence in the workplace not only leads to improved working relationships and teamwork, but also enhances one's leadership capabilities and overall success. Practicing EI is a skill that can positively impact both personal and professional growth, for leaders and employees alike. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

Any views and opinions expressed in this article may or may not reflect the views and opinions of the Construction Management Association of America (CMAA). By publishing this piece, CMAA is not expressing endorsement of the individual, the article, or their association, organization, or company.